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Keynote

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RACE, CULTURE, CLASS, AND THE *MYTH* OF CRISIS: AN ECOGENERIST PERSPECTIVE ON CHILD WELFARE

KEYNOTE

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The distinguished speakers who gathered for this Symposium, not to mention the wonderful audience, were as impressive a group of experts on the child welfare system as one could find anywhere in the USA. Collectively, they know far more about child welfare than I could ever begin to learn. I felt truly honored but also somewhat daunted at the prospect of opening the day's discussion and I am honored by the opportunity to provide an essay to open this Symposium issue.

Race, Culture, Class, and Crisis. The first three words are essential to understanding the current state of the American child welfare system. The fourth word is deeply deceptive and misleading. Consider the dictionary meaning of crisis: "a crucial or decisive point or situation; a turning point[; a]n unstable condition . . . involving an impending abrupt or decisive change."[1] We have been using the word crisis to describe the child welfare system for as long as there has been a system. This false crisis must be recognized for what it is: a chronic state of affairs. It cannot simply be blamed on system mismanagement. We continue to speak of "crisis" because Americans hate to admit that this is our own homegrown status quo. The "myth" of a system in crisis obscures the political reality that Americans, from the policy-makers to the voters, actually appear to be content with levels of child poverty and barriers to equal

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1 AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE (4th ed. 2000), *available at* http://education.yahoo.com/reference/dictionary/;_ylt=AlfVENhBDGTNthfgbC2E6gj0HYkC.

opportunity that shock the conscience of our peers in developed nations the world over.[2]

Often, the failures of the American system are used to indict the competency and commitment of those who work within it. Instead, I see a scenario in which committed public servants daily confront the overwhelming challenges created by a public culture of neglect. Crucial resources are unavailable, caseloads are high, pay is low, and the child welfare system is like a life raft sinking under the weight of the millions of American children and families—disproportionately families of color—living below the poverty line. No wonder those who work within the system are perpetually on the defensive. Confidentiality rules intended to protect the child victims end up obscuring from public view the reality of our foreseeable failures. But these are not individual failures, they are a collective failure of all Americans to protect our most vulnerable children and to provide an environment in which all children can grow strong and healthy.

In addressing those who attend a symposium on child welfare or read a symposium issue, I know I am preaching to the choir. From underpaid caseworkers to beleaguered commissioners, all of us care deeply about children. But, to borrow a phrase from the War in Iraq, we are loyal soldiers who have been sent to war with the Army we have, not the Army we would like to have. And many decades after war was declared on child abuse, we are stuck in a familiar quagmire, with too many children in state custody who could be at home, and too many children injured and killed whom we should have been able to protect.

But while the war in Iraq is taking place on foreign soil, the war on our children is taking place here at home. We cannot bring the troops "home." Nor can we blame this "crisis" on dead-enders or terrorists. We the American people are the architects of our own defeat. The high value we place on children in our public rhetoric is betrayed by our unwillingness to spend what it takes to make a healthy environment for ***all*** of our children.

I am tired of hearing, in good economic times and in bad, at peace and at war, that there is no money for children. The United States has the highest gross domestic product ("GDP") in

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[2] *See infra* notes 3–18 and accompanying text.

the world. Yet, according to official measurements, over 17 percent of American children live below the poverty line.[3] Moreover, the poverty line, as defined by federal law, is set unconscionably low. Developed in the 1960's to measure the cost of a defined quantity of goods and services, it no longer reflects the realities of modern life.[4] As of January 2006, the poverty line for a family of four was set at $20,000.[5] Yet today, the average income a family of four must have in order to meet its most basic needs is $40,000 per year.[6] Measured in terms of unmet needs, almost forty percent of American children are growing up poor.[7]

But aren't our children still richer than most? Certainly, a child who would be below the poverty line in absolute income in America might be "rich" in a country with a very low GNP. Most developed countries, however, measure child poverty rates in relative rather than absolute terms. They realize that, in order to see how well we are doing by our children, we must compare ourselves with other peer nations and we must examine income inequality within our own nation. In its Annual Report Card, UNICEF gathers data on "Child Poverty in Rich Countries," defined as those countries who are members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development ("OECD"). Under the UNICEF measure, a child is considered poor if the income available to that child is less than half the median income available to a child growing up in that society. By this measure, America ranks twenty-fifth out of the twenty-six rich countries reporting data, with 21.9 percent of America's children in poverty. Denmark ranks first with only 2.4 percent of its children living below 50 percent of the median national income. In Germany the figure is 10.2 percent, in Canada it is 14.9

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[3] CARMEN DENAVAS-WALT ET AL., U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, INCOME, POVERTY, AND HEALTH INSURANCE COVERAGE IN THE UNITED STATES: 2005, at 13 (2006), *available at* http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/p60-231.pdf.

[4] *See* Nancy K. Cauthen & Sarah Fass, *Measuring Income and Poverty in the United States*, FACT SHEET (Nat'l Ctr. for Children in Poverty, New York, N.Y.), Apr. 2007, at 1, *available at* http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_707.html.

[5] *See* U.S. Census Bureau, Poverty Thresholds 2006, http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/threshld/thresh06.html (last visited July 30, 2007).

[6] *See* Cauthen & Fass, *supra* note 4, at 3.

[7] *See* Ayana Douglas-Hall et al., *Basic Facts About Low Income Children*, FACT SHEET (Nat'l Ctr. for Children in Poverty, New York, N.Y.), Sept. 2006, at 1, *available at* http://nccp.org/publications/pub_678.html.

percent, and only Mexico, at 27.7 percent, ranks worse than the United States.[8]

These figures, troubling as they are, tell only part of the story. The reason the U.S. lags so far behind our peers is not simply because we have more children growing up in low income families. It is because we do not take simple steps to raise our children out of poverty. The statistics above look at child poverty *after* transfers of resources through tax and income support programs.[9] The rate of poverty before any state intervention is far higher. Experts call this "the market child poverty rate" because, in effect, it is the rate of child poverty created by market forces. Our peer nations universally slash from 10 to 15 percentage points from their child poverty rates by providing income supports, family allowances, disability and sickness benefits, day care, unemployment insurance, employment promotion, and other forms of social assistance to poor families. Many Americans assume that other countries have little or no poverty and that our high child poverty rates simply reflect the fact that America is a diverse society with many low income families as well as many rich families. Of course, the industrious Fins in their small homogenous country have few poor families. But, Finland has a market child poverty rate of 18.1 percent. The Finnish people slash this rate by over fifteen points through social spending. Over 25.4 percent of children in the U.K. are poor, but after social programs are factored in, the percentage is reduced to 15.4. New Zealand's 27.9 percent child poverty rate, higher even than our own, is slashed to 16.3 by social spending. France slashes its child poverty rate from 27.7 to an astonishingly low 7.5 percent. The United States child poverty rate before income supports is 26.6 percent. After social supports are included, the child poverty rate barely budges, dropping only to 21.9 percent.[10]

My purpose here is not to explain all the nuances of measuring poverty and factoring in government supports. I leave those to the experts. My point is that the correlation between government spending and poverty may be complex, but the

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[8] UNICEF, INNOCENTI REPORT CARD 6, CHILD POVERTY IN PERSPECTIVE: AN OVERVIEW OF CHILD WELL-BEING IN RICH COUNTRIES 4 fig.1 (2005), *available at* http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/repcard6e.pdf.

[9] *Id.* at 20.

[10] *Id.* at 21 fig.9.

bottom line is unmistakably clear. No OECD country devoting 10 percent or more of its GDP to social spending has a child poverty rate greater than 10 percent. No OECD country devoting less than 5 percent of their GDP to such benefits has a child poverty rate of less than 15 percent.

But, what does the child poverty rate have to do with child welfare, the topic of this symposium? According to the experts, " 'income is positively correlated with virtually every dimension of child well-being that social scientists measure, and this is true for every country for which we have data.' "[11] I was reminded of this truth when I saw a headline in the New York Times: "In Turnabout, Infant Deaths Climb in South." Mysteriously, in Mississippi and other Southern States, the infant mortality rates have begun to rise after a period of improvement, and now stand at 1.14 percent overall and 1.7 percent among Blacks. Focusing on Mississippi, the reporter chronicles the role of cuts in income supports, poor nutrition and lack of access to prenatal care, and even the creation by government of barriers designed to deter access to care by those who are legally entitled to have it.[12] All this happened in a political climate where tax cuts and Medicaid cuts were the winning themes in electing a new governor.

The "system failures" we see around us are no accident and they are no crisis. They are the foreseeable result of a deeply entrenched American tradition that marginalizes, stigmatizes, and abandons poor children and their families, and too often seeks to punish rather than to protect and uplift. In the land of rugged individualism, spending in the public sector favors the elderly over the young.[13] Elders are seen as having "earned" their benefits, such as Medicare and Social Security, while children are seen as receiving handouts. This posture is both foolhardy and unjust. Few Americans understand that America's children are not only its future but its past. America owes a huge debt to its poorest children. America was built by poor children. Over half the settlers in the colonies south of New England were indentured servants, and their average age was fourteen. The youngest was six. Child labor built our empire. Now we are the

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[11] *Id.* at 7–8 (quoting sociologist Susan Mayer).

[12] Erik Eckholm, *In Turnabout, Infant Deaths Climb in South*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 22, 2007, at 11.

[13] *See* ADAM CARASSO ET AL., THE URBAN INST., KIDS' SHARE 2007: HOW CHILDREN FARE IN THE FEDERAL BUDGET 9 fig.4 (2007).

richest nation on Earth, and we are still handling child welfare the way we did in the post-Civil War South and in the Era of the Orphan Trains, by taking children out of poor families and communities, instead of bringing resources to those families and communities.[14]

Not only our commitment of resources to our children, but also our strategies for victory are defective. Our child welfare programs and priorities are distorted by ideologies about race, class, and individual responsibility that have nothing to do with children's safety or well-being. We Americans harbor ideological beliefs and unstated biases that blind us to the needs of our brothers and sisters and, yes, our children. Belief number one is that America is a classless society. Talk of economic inequality and plans for redressing it are rejected as "class warfare." According to our cherished myths, all Americans are created equal and independent, and all anyone needs or should expect from the government is the freedom to pursue his own happiness. Every child has an equal opportunity to grow up to be president. A recent report from Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University and the Brookings Institute examines social mobility in America and puts the lie to this story.[15] Americans are not all created equal and much of the inequality is a function of socioeconomic status—in other words, of poverty. "Social mobility" is the difference from one generation to another "between a person's current income, wealth, or occupation and that of the family that raised her."[16] According to the Princeton/Brookings Institute study, it takes *five generations* to overcome the effects of being born poor.[17] Many continue to believe that the United States is unique among nations as a land of opportunity. In fact, the United States is about the middle of

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[14] For a more detailed discussion of the Orphan Trains, the re-enslavement of Black children after the Civil War, and of the contributions of poor children to building our nation, see BARBARA BENNETT WOODHOUSE, THE COURAGE OF INNOCENCE: CHILDREN'S RIGHTS AND AMERICAN VALUES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY (forthcoming 2008) (citing PEGGY COOPER DAVIS, NEGLECTED STORIES: THE CONSTITUTION AND FAMILY VALUES (1997); MARILYN IRVING HOLT, THE ORPHAN TRAINS: PLACING OUT IN AMERICA (1992)).

[15] *See generally* 16 FUTURE OF CHILD., Fall 2006 (focusing on the question of whether America really is the land of opportunity).

[16] Emily Beller & Michael Hout, *Intergenerational Social Mobility: The United States in Comparative Perspective*, 16 FUTURE OF CHILD., Fall 2006, at 19, 20.

[17] Princeton/Brookings Institute, Executive Summary, 16 FUTURE OF CHILD., Fall 2006, http://www.futureofchildren.org/usr_doc/Opportunity_Summary.pdf.

the pack in occupational mobility, and it is lower than most in income mobility. While income is not the only factor, and differences in family structure may play a role, income supports, investments in public education, and equal opportunity legislation can go far in closing the opportunity gap. As with child poverty rates, the United States falls behind its peers in implementing policies that provide a level playing field for all of its children. In the last few years, the gap between America's rich and its middle and working classes has widened such that it resembles the age of the Robber Barons.[18] The poor have fallen off the charts.

A second myth is that we are a colorblind society. While the reasons behind the statistics are difficult to untangle, it is impossible to deny the racial inequalities in both the criminal justice and child welfare systems. While children of color make up only 38 percent of our population, they are 61 percent of our foster care population.[19] In places like New York City or the Indian reservations of the American West, where poverty and social disintegration are concentrated in racially segregated enclaves, the numbers are staggering. Race is always a volatile issue in discussions of child welfare policy, but empirical studies of the effects of race in less controversial contexts provide proof that race matters in even the most ordinary interactions. In a famous study by economist Ian Ayres, researchers were sent out to bargain with car dealers. The researchers were from four racial/gender groups: Caucasian males, Caucasian females, Black males, and Black females. Each researcher had the same script, the same training, and the same level of expertise. White men got the best deals. Black women got the worst deals—by far.[20] Racial stereotypes and inequalities of power permeate our culture. We remain a racist society, and not a race blind society, because we turn a blind eye to the effects of race.

I believe strongly that racism must be a vital part of our national conversation. But, focusing on race can obscure the role

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[18] *See* Paul Krugman, *Gilded Once More*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 27, 2007, at A27.

[19] *See* Child Trends DataBank, Racial and Ethnic Composition of the Child Population (2003), http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/indicators/60RaceandEthnicComposition.cfm; *Foster Care*, CHILD WELFARE INFO. GATEWAY (Children's Bureau, D.C.), July 2005, at 7, *available at* http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/foster.pdf.

[20] Ian Ayres & Peter Siegelman, *Race and Gender Discrimination in Bargaining for a New Car*, AM. ECON. REV., June 1995, at 304, 319.

of class. In America, with our history of racial oppression, we conflate issues of poverty with race and class. But, moving from Philadelphia to rural Florida, as I did in 2001, sensitized me to the independent role played by class. In teaching my course on child abuse and neglect, I had to change my Philly hypothetical, involving children found abandoned in a crack house in an African-American inner city ghetto, to achieve a sense of the reality on the ground. In places like Levy, Polk, and Citrus Counties in Florida, where my students work, the drug is crystal meth not crack, and the children are found "abandoned" in a trailer not a boarded-up tenement. In North Central Florida, regional dialect, clothing styles, the age of your motor vehicle, and the number of confederate flags on its bumpers are some of the salient cues of socioeconomic status.

In my classroom, I strive to challenge the notion that poverty and poor parenting are synonymous. Yet my middle class students are still quick to conclude that raising a child in a dwelling without running water and electricity is child abuse. Tell that to Abe Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, both of whom were cradled in loving homes with neither electricity nor running water. But, if we confuse poverty and neglect, we do a disservice to children as well as parents. As a guest judge in my class pointed out, in Florida, if we took kids out of their homes for lack of electricity and running water, shelters would get pretty crowded during hurricane season. And yet, conditions within the home created by poverty as opposed to "natural" disaster too often serve as the trigger for state intervention.

Poverty is distinct from race in legal analysis as well. The 14th Amendment to the Constitution prohibits legal decision-makers from treating people differently because of their race. Poverty is not a suspect class, however, and people can be and ***are*** treated differently because they are poor. While most child protection laws prohibit removal of children from their families because of economic need, economic issues like lack of housing, food, healthcare, and childcare play a huge role in populating our child welfare system. When I began work in Philadelphia in 1988, I recall the head of Children's Services estimating that 80 percent of their caseload involved housing issues. I recall one case handled by one of my University of Pennsylvania students in which a mother's children were removed because a portion of the ceiling of her apartment collapsed, rendering it unsafe. She

had already filed a complaint through the Law School's housing clinic about the condition of her apartment. But, that did not stop the roof from caving in. So now she and her children were shifted over to our child welfare caseload and there was no room in any family shelter for her to remain with her children. I do not know if she ever got her children back.

Periodically, something awful happens in the child welfare system—a Liza Isquierdo killed in New York or a Rilya Wilson lost without a trace in Florida—and we hear renewed calls for a complete overhaul of the system. But, our deepest assumptions and habits are difficult to dislodge. During the period of self-examination following the Marisol case, I was invited to participate in workshops exploring ideas for reform. I recall asking a New York City caseworker (a dedicated and hardworking young man), if poverty was ever the cause of a mother losing her children. "Oh no," he replied. "Poverty is not a ground for removing children." But when I asked him to describe a typical termination of parental rights ("TPR") situation he said, "Mom does not comply with her case plan."

Pressed for specifics, he pointed to Mom's failure to find suitable housing. Yes, he admitted, the waiting lists for housing were several years long and the law only gave her a year to complete her case plan. But, I could see he was unable to connect the dots between Mom's failure to comply and her poverty. I am sure that housing remains an issue here in New York as it does in Philadelphia and Florida. In recent years, low-income housing has become even more scarce and less affordable, and housing supports have been cut and in many cases eliminated. "Decent and affordable housing has a demonstrable impact on family stability and the life outcomes of children," and the housing shortage hits minority families hardest of all. [21]

Why are we not addressing these problems at their roots? Blame it on American culture. Culture has played a complex role in our child welfare system. Much has been written about the "culture of poverty" and much blame has been heaped on poor families for their supposed cultural deficits. This is not what I mean when I speak of the role of culture in our current policies. Let me highlight two ways in which culture dictates our

[21] BIPARTISAN MILLENNIAL HOUSING COMMISSION, MEETING OUR NATION'S HOUSING CHALLENGES 1–2 (2002), *available at* http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/mhc/MHCReport.pdf.

strategies and limits our successes. The culture of rugged individualism has made it difficult for Americans to accept that parents do not have to be bad parents to have children in trouble. All parents need social and economic supports, and middle class parents get them—through their own affluent parents, through tax breaks, through that head start in life that comes with not being born poor in a poor neighborhood.

Despite these facts of life, the common sense notion that it takes a village to raise a child has become a laugh line. Instead of fully funding strategies like home visiting nurses and head start that are known to be effective in reducing child abuse and neglect, we pour resources into punitive interventions that punish parents and stigmatize children. Our child protection system has become a de facto welfare system. Dependency court is the narrow gateway through which families must pass to access services, and the passport is an adjudication or shelter order.

A second challenge, covered in depth in a chapter I wrote in a book called *Children, Culture and Violence*, is the adverse impact of a mass market culture of violence on growing organisms. Our children grow up steeped in a culture of violence. In media, in schools, and in homes, children are taught the value of violence. They become consumers of violence and victims of violence, elevating the risks that they will grow up to be perpetrators of violence.

In my work, I have called for a radical cultural shift. Instead of elevating individual liberty above all other values, the shift would highlight the interconnectedness of all systems including our social systems. I have coined the term "Ecogenerism" to describe this approach. Ecogenerism is a way of thinking that combines the skills of an ecological perspective—a focus on the environments in which life unfolds—with Erik Erikson's concept of "generativity"—a state of human and social maturity marked by a commitment to the needs of the next generation. An "Ecogenerist" is someone who embraces the model of ecogenerism in thinking about child welfare as well as a wide range of other problems confronting children and society. An ecogenerist is committed to maintaining and restoring a healthy social and

physical environment for the benefit of the next generation and generations to come.[22]

Despite their clear effects, race, class, and culture have been invisible in the dominant legal paradigm for thinking about child welfare. For my first twenty years of teaching children's law, I began each course by drawing a triangle on the board, with the state (meaning government, whether local, state, or federal) at the top and the child and parents at the base. Government actions with respect to the family were characterized as "state intervention" and families were protected from this unwelcome intrusion by a zone of privacy. This diagram may have made sense to constitutional law scholars, steeped in a culture of individual rights that places such a high value on personal autonomy and the right to be let alone, but social scientists long ago developed ways of considering children's reality that are far more complex and nuanced.

Recently, I replaced my triangular diagram with psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner's diagram of the ecology of childhood. An ecological metaphor invites us to examine the complex and interdependent environments in which our children grow. At the center is the child, located in the Microsystem of family. But, rather than viewing child and family and state as detached from the larger social environment (recall my triangular diagram), we see children in relation to a variety of other Microsystems including school, neighborhood, peer group, faith community, and the like. Surrounding these Microsystems are Exosystems—zones where children do not necessarily go, but which directly affect their welfare. The parent's workplace, for example, can provide health benefits and daycare or can provide no benefits and require mandatory overtime. The market can supply good paying and secure jobs or it can value efficiency and fighting inflation over full employment. The media can depict violence against women and children as a sign of strength or a sign of weakness. The mental health system is an example of the effects of an Exosystem on children. Increasingly, the child

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[22] *See generally* Bennett Woodhouse, *Cleaning Up Toxic Violence: An EcoGenerist Paradigm*, *in* HANDBOOK OF CHILDREN, CULTURE, AND VIOLENCE ch. 21 (Nancy E. Dowd et al. eds., 2006); Barbara Bennett Woodhouse, *Ecogenerism: An Environmentalist Approach to Protecting Endangered Children*, 12 VA. J. SOC. POL'Y & L. 409 (2005); Barbara Bennett Woodhouse, *Reframing the Debate About the Socialization of Children: An Environmentalist Paradigm*, 2004 U. CHI. LEGAL F. 85.

welfare system has become a de facto mental health care system.[23] From forty to sixty percent of the children in the child welfare system have serious mental health issues, and per child expenditures are up to seventy percent higher than in non-foster care health systems, reflecting, in part, the fact that families often have no alternative but to place a child in foster care in order to access mental health services.[24] Everyone who works in the system has seen, as I have, a judge with no other alternative forced to adjudicate a child dependent or delinquent in order to access mental health or other social services.

What are the forces that shape these Microsystems and Exosystems? Sociologists have coined the term Macrosystem to describe the culture of ideas and power, the values, politics, and prejudices that characterize a given society. Like blood flowing within the body, or water in a natural ecosystem, these ideas and values permeate the entire ecosystem. An anthropologist of American culture, examining what we do, not just what we say, would conclude that the American Macrosystem is not very "family friendly." Individual responsibility is the dominant value. There is a strong stigma on dependency and a devaluation of care giving. Our policies and priorities are highly market-driven, focusing on efficiency and accumulation of wealth rather than quality of life. And there is an entrenched culture of division, marked by classism, sexism, racism and, increasingly, sectarianism. These are the ideas that divide *our* children from other people's children. They prevent us from embracing all children as "our" own.

I could end my story here. If racism and inequality are facts of life, like gravity and evolution, there is little to be done. If tinkering with the "market rate" of child poverty is a form of messing with Mother Nature, we must simply accept that the poverty of the parents shall be visited on the children unto the fifth generation. But, as my comparative statistics on child poverty demonstrate, inequalities of class, race, and culture are socially constructed, not divinely or naturally ordained.

Let me give you a case history. This one involves a family of four. Mother works full time and Father is fighting a heroin

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[23] *See* Susan dosReis et al., *Mental Health Services for Youths in Foster Care and Disabled Youths*, 91 AM. J. PUB. HEALTH 1094, 1096 (July 2001), *available at* http://www.ajph.org/cgi/reprint/91/7/1094.pdf.

[24] *Id.* at 1094.

addiction. They have two children, a healthy three-year-old and a terminally ill six-year-old. These risk factors are daunting. Most of us would predict that, by this time next year, the father will be in jail, the mother will have had to quit her job, and the family will be a case number in the child welfare system. But, let's look at some of the protective factors that can come into play and counterbalance these daunting risks.

The family I am describing is embedded in a strong co-resident extended family, in a close-knit community with traditions of mutual help. There is a community school for children from birth to age thirteen within walking distance, with extended hours, a nurse on staff, and a dining room serving three hot meals a day. Government provides universal health care, including treatment of addiction, which is viewed as a public health issue, and parents get up to two years of paid family leave to care for sick children. Are we in Paradise? No, we are in Lacugnano, Italy.

Fast forward to a year later. While mourning the loss of their daughter to leukemia, the family is still intact, still has a roof over its head. Mother, who was eligible for paid leave as her daughter was dying, is now back at her job, and Father is graduating from a year long residential drug treatment program and returning to gainful employment.

As experiences in other countries and other times have taught us, a society is capable of re-shaping its Macrosystems. Italian culture is not so different from American culture. American culture also includes a set of values that challenge the dominant images: A belief in equal opportunity; solidarity in times of trial; commitment to family; strong local institutions and faith communities; and a belief in Generativity—a willingness to sacrifice for future generations.

It is time to stop blaming the usual suspects (bad parents, bad bureaucracies, bad politicians) and shoulder the blame ourselves, as the voters and citizens who control our own collective destiny. We must move our leaders out of the crisis-as-usual management mode and insist on the fundamental social changes that are needed to take a toxic environment and make it safe for children. But, before we can deal effectively with this environment, it is imperative to recognize race, class, and culture as factors in creating it.

We have been living in an era of what I shall call the "Small Society" marked by what often seems like a "War on the Poor" (think the opposite of LBJ's "Great Society" and "War on Poverty"). But, suppose we were to wage the "War on Child Abuse" as if we actually wanted to win it. Suppose we were able to achieve the paradigm shift accomplished by the early environmentalists, who forced us to see the threats to our physical environment in sweeping ecological terms rather than as matters of individual responsibility. What shifts would an environmentalist perspective involve? A focus on improving the environment, not simply removing the "at risk" child. A commitment to address needs of all families, so that all families are supported. Seeing each child in the context of family and community. Bringing resources into the Microsystems, where the child lives, instead of uprooting and transplanting the child.

An Ecogenerist perspective would force us to confront environmental issues such as racism and poverty, lack of health care and community supports, domestic violence, and the hopelessness that feeds addiction. It would force us to ask more basic questions, instead of blaming a dysfunctional system. Most of all, it would ask us to look beyond the personal and the systemic to the environmental and to weigh the long term social costs of ignoring the environmental risks of poverty, racism, and a culture of individualism. It would force us to create a better environment for all our children as their birthright, instead of waiting until so many of them have suffered irreparable harm.

There would still be a need for state intervention in cases of abuse and neglect. But, by making family supports and prevention our foundation and not our last resort, the numbers of cases requiring coercive interventions would shrink drastically. Maybe then America would be able to join the community of "Generist" nations that truly ***do*** place a high value on their children and are willing to dedicate a share of their national wealth to reduce the crippling rates of child poverty that afflict and can ultimately destroy a market democracy.